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## *2x01 Angel Echoes*

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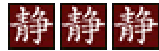
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River Tam was dreaming.

Wrapped in the threadbare comforter Simon drew around her shoulders earlier that night, she entered REM. Underneath her eyelids, her eyes rolled and twitched in terror. Her throat was taut, holding back the whimpers and moans that tried to fight their way free. She didn't want to let them know how much they were hurting her.



She is sitting in a large silver chair, her arms and legs held down by restraints. Technicians work around her, their professional chatter lapping like waves against the edges of her mind. Their words and their thoughts overlap and intertwine and it is hard for her to separate them.

She's been in this room many times before. They call it the Neural Re-Imaging Chamber, but to her it is the Blue Room. The low-level blue lights make the stainless steel equipment around her glow eerily, as if they aren't real but only half-formed images at the edges of her brain. River always feels as if she's in an alternate reality when they bring her to this place; like living in a nightmare. She wonders if her form is as insubstantial to the doctor and technicians as their tools are to her. More and more, she questions the existence of anything outside this room and the pain it brings.

She used to think she was a girl, but now she's not even sure if she really exists.

She doesn't need to hear the whir of the pneumatic doors opening to know the doctor has arrived. River can hear the glide of his feet against the tile; the gentle in-and-out of his breathing; the way his heart beats irregularly behind the cage of his ribs. She is aware of each individual strand of hair on his head, can feel it growing. He is agitated today, his muscles tense and stiff with displeasure. It is easy to determine the source.

Normally, the doctor is by himself when he enters the room, but sometimes other people are with him. River senses a new presence before she sees him - a well-groomed man, in a tailored gray uniform of a high-ranking Alliance official. He remains in the shadows, studying her intently, but she doesn't need to see him to know that he's there - she can smell the rich scents of leather and expensive cologne permeating the air around him. He is a man used to giving orders. His heart beats strong and purposeful in his chest, every muscle coiled, as if he were a lion among men; or a shark. Perhaps he is. It is this man's presence that has made the doctor so uncomfortable.

The doctor tries to ignore him as he murmurs softly with the technicians, before he grabs a pad and punches in a code. It's her code, the one they always use to access her file. The pulse tones have a distinctive rhythm. There's a broken melody to the sequence that appeals to her: 1122TAM. After scanning the pad, he grimaces and nods his head before turning and handing it to the Alliance officer. A well-groomed hand reaches out to take it, but the man doesn't even bother to look at the screen.

The soft hiss of the electronic IV indicates that the doctor is ready to begin his tests. River does not want to close her eyes because she knows the minute she does, they'll hurt her even more, but the effects of the drugs are inevitable. Her eyes drift shut, even though the rest of her senses remain on high alert. She is not asleep, even though they think she is. She never sleeps in the Blue Room. In fact, she tries not to sleep at all.

The drugs make her easier to control though -- it is harder to fight them when her veins betray her by carrying liquid poison through her system. The drugs help them rip into her brain -- she can feel them forcing it to expand. This is the worst part, because she can feel them rushing into her -- not just the men in the room -- but all the other people in the building -- their memories and thoughts bombard her, breaking her apart, burying her in the rubble of her mind. Each time she comes to this room, she loses more of herself. She cannot make her own voice heard over the cacophony of the other voices in her head.

"Nightmare?" someone asks.

"Off the charts." The technician nearest her taps a code into the data pad attached to her chair and smiles. His mind says *I hate this job*, but his voice says "Scary monsters."

The doctor steps closer, before demanding, "Let's amp it up. Delcium, eight-drop." He eyes River coldly and clutches his clipboard a little closer, before once again turning to the man standing at the back of the room.

"See, most of our best work is done when they're asleep. We can monitor and direct their subconscious, implant suggestions..." He stops when River starts convulsing, before he moves closer to the man he's talking to and indicates the girl in the chair. "It's a little startling to see, but the results are spectacular. Especially in this case: River Tam is our star pupil." *And why do I have to explain myself to you?*

"I've heard that," the other man states as he steps forward into the light. His body is tight with the professional stance of a commander and his face displays no emotion as he studies the girl. She listens intently, but instead of hearing his real voice, all she hears is static, as if he's not really there or somehow managing to shield himself from her. Her internal radar pings off him, but he is insubstantial, like her, and difficult to determine.

"She'll be ideal for defense deployment, even with the side effects."

"Tell me about them," the other man demands.

The doctor smiles the tight, rigid smile of a man not used to having to explain himself to anyone. "Well, obviously, she's unstable --the neural stripping gives them heightened cognitive reception, but it also destabilizes their own reality matrix. It manifests as borderline schizophrenia --"

The other man nods slightly at this, even as he interrupts the doctor. "What use do we have for a psychic if she's insane?"

The doctor objects to this question strenuously. "She's not just a psychic; given the right trigger, this girl is a living weapon." The cool regard of the younger man is making him nervous and it's starting to show. "And she has lucid periods -- we hope to improve upon the...I'm sorry, Sir, I have to ask if there's some reason for this inspection?"

"Am I making you nervous?"

The doctor blinks at this non-answer. "Key members of Parliament have personally observed this subject. I was told their support for the project was unanimous. The demonstration of her power --"

The younger man cuts him off: "How is she physically?"

"Like nothing we've seen. All of our subjects are conditioned for combat, but River -- she's a creature of extraordinary grace."

"River? You refer to your subjects by their first name?" He doesn't wait for an answer, instead he moves closer to the girl in the chair. "Please check your com-link. You will have received a directive over the Cortex by now, Dr. Mathias, regarding your experiment and this particular girl. We want her. We want to test her."

"I can assure you, she is undergoing a barrage of --"

"Not your tests run in a controlled environment. We want to test her out in the real world, to see if her training will hold. Before we can let these experiments go any further, we need to make sure they present no danger to us."

"She's not ready." The doctor says this as if he has the last word on the matter. The cold smirk the younger man allows to cross his face says otherwise.

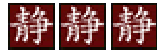
"We think she is," he replies. "More than ready. Our request is simple enough and until you've complied your funding is cut off, effective immediately."

"You can't just turn her loose in the world!" the doctor responds vehemently. "There's no telling what she'd do."

"We don't plan on turning her loose," comes the measured response. "We've invested too much money in her." The man examines the doctor coldly. "We've invested too much money in this program. No -- she'll be with someone who will be able to study her and determine the feasibility of this plan. She'll be with her brother."

“Brother?” the doctor questions, his voice high-pitched with stress and nerves. “She doesn’t have a brother.”

The younger man is leaning forward now, studying the girl’s face. “She does now,” he responds softly. When her eyes pop open and lock on his, the blue of his gaze freezes her to her soul.



“River!” Someone was holding her; arms warm around her to chase away the demons of her dreams. “Shh, *mei-mei*. It’s all right. It was just a nightmare. Shh.”

The shadows drifting around her weren’t blue and artificial, but gray and black and real. They helped calm her down, as did the warm light flickering in front of her closed eyelids.

There was never anything warm in the Blue Room. There was never anything real there.

She could feel a hand stroking down her back; she could taste the salt of her tears and the copper-tang of blood in her mouth, where she had bitten her cheek. She was not restrained anymore.

She was free. She remembered. She was on Serenity and Dr. Mathias would never stick needles in her brain again. Her hands flew up to clutch at the man holding her, digging into his shoulders as she keened her distress. She could feel the cotton of his nightshirt underneath her palms, each individual thread pressing against her skin.

“Just a dream,” she repeated brokenly after him. “Not real.”

The problem was they felt real - at one point, they were real. She knew she was remembering what had happened to her and only wished she could tell Simon, so he could help her. But the words she needed were only fragments in her mind, and Simon didn’t understand her.

Simon: who loved her.

*We don't plan on turning her loose.*

Simon: who risked everything to save her.

*She'll be with someone who will be able to study her.*

Simon: her brother.

*She doesn't have a brother.*

She stiffened against his chest, her sobs frozen in her throat as she pulled away from him and looked up into his beloved face.

His jaw was tight with the anguish he felt on her behalf, his lips pulled into a thin line of regret and guilt. His dark hair stuck up unbecomingly and she knew her dreams had roused him from his bed: she could see a crease against his face where the piping of the pillowcase had indented it.

His eyes were warm and blue, filled with concern as his thumbs made calming circles against her collarbone.

The sleepy heat emanating from his body enveloped her like his hugs and his smile.

Normally, she found it comforting, but tonight she was real. Tonight, it made her shiver.

She told herself he was her brother. He has always been her brother. He had promised her he'd always love her and protect her. She knows...she knows....

"River?" he whispered. "River?"

She'd heard that voice before, in her nightmares.

His fine, aristocratic features have haunted her dreams. And his eyes -- those warm blue eyes -- they have looked at her coldly before, as though she were a bug under a microscope.

River Tam stared at Simon, and screamed.

She had no brother.

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"Mornin', Cap'n!" Kaylee chirped as Mal entered the kitchen. Mal smiled at her as he helped himself to some coffee, or what passed as such on Serenity. His smile turned to a frown as he caught sight of Simon staring blearily into his own cup, dark circles under his eyes indicating he'd had another rough night.

"You ain't gettin' enough rest, Doc," he stated bluntly, as he slid into the chair opposite the younger man. "How'm I supposed to trust a doctor to patch up my crew when I'm afraid he's gonna collapse from exhaustion at any minute now?"

The Doc looked at him and blinked, "River --"

“It’s always River,” Mal interrupted, holding out a warning hand. “I ‘preciate how dedicated y’are to that sister of yours, I really do, but what good are you to her or me if you make yourself sick?”

Simon shrugged at that and frowned into his coffee again. “I gave her a different drug combination last night,” he replied. “I thought it might help her, but obviously...” He shrugged ruefully. “I had to give her a smoother before she ended up waking everyone else up.”

“Maybe she should start the night off with a smoother, and that way you could sleep, too,” the captain pointed out reasonably. “Ain’t no one on this boat can help you much if you make yourself sick. How’s that leg of yours?”

Simon grimaced as he automatically flexed it. “Sore. At least I know what it feels like to be shot, now. Early was right about that...”

Kaylee stiffened at the mention of the Bounty Hunter and she dropped the spoon she was using into the pot with a clang.

Mal and Simon jumped at the sudden noise, and looked at her. They both knew that Early had threatened the mechanic. They might not know to what extent, but they saw that lately little Kaylee's eyes didn't always match the smile her mouth was making. Mal noted the way Simon couldn't hide his concern for the girl, and bit back a slight smirk.

“You did good though; you all did good.” Mal offered reassuringly. “Ceptin’ Jayne, o’course. You sure you haven’t been giving him smoothers, Doc? Ain’t right for a man to sleep that heavy.”

The younger man shook his head and grimaced. “He’d need a horse tranquilizer to knock him out. A smoother wouldn’t do anything.”

“Simon...” Kaylee giggled but it was a little forced, “be nice.”

“It’s the truth,” Simon muttered. “Remember how long it took to knock him out the last time? The man’s not human.”

“Talking about Jayne again, are we?” Wash offered cheerfully as he and Zoe entered the room. The pilot walked over to see what Kaylee was making but he grimaced in distaste as he caught a whiff of her concoction. He settled on coffee, pouring two large mugs. His wife had already slid into her regular seat, her expression stoic. Wash winked at her as he handed Zoe her beverage and she smiled back.

“I still find it odd he slept through that,” she offered. “The man’s a trained mercenary, the *ta ma de hun dan*. Isn’t he supposed to sleep light?”



Everyone else shrugged at that. Kaylee grabbed a bowl and started ladling out breakfast. "If it weren't for River, who knows what mighta happened." She shuddered.

Mal stopped her, "It don't bear thinkin' on."

"River did good though," Kaylee continued. "Makes me wonder what she'd be like if she weren't so crazy."

Simon smiled wistfully at that, "She'd be brilliant. I wish..."

"If wishes were horses then beggars would ride, my momma used to say," Kaylee said, laying a gentle hand on the Simon's shoulder. "You're doing everything you can to help her. You ain't God."

"No, but I should have found something by now to..."

"Good morning." The sound of a bright voice coming from the door of the kitchen cut him off and attracted everyone's attention. River was standing there, her face sunny. She smiled at everyone in turn before frowning inscrutably at her brother. For once, her hair was neatly brushed and tied back from her face with a simple ribbon, and the clothes she was wearing had been adjusted so they didn't look so big.

"River!" Simon smiled at her, "You look...you brushed your hair."

"All of them," River corrected quietly. She moved into the room, walking around the table to get to the oven and trying to avoid looking at Simon. "The artificial oatmeal flavored protein smells delicious, Kaylee. I'm hungry."

Simon slid to his feet and approached her, smiling. "Did you sleep better last night, after your nightmare?"

River moved away from him and shrugged, but otherwise didn't respond. Simon tried again, reaching for an empty bowl and attempting to hand it to her for her breakfast.

"How are you feeling this morning? You seem well."

She ignored him and the bowl, instead getting her own and quickly filling it, before moving to sit beside Mal. Simon tried not to let his hurt show as he carefully returned the bowl he'd been holding back to the shelf and went back to his seat. Mal cocked an eyebrow at him, as if to say *'What's up with her?'* but the younger man couldn't answer.

"I wish we had some sugar," River said to Mal. "The real kind, that's white and made from sugar cane. When I was a little girl, my father used to bring home cut cane for me to suck on. It was always such a wonderful treat."



“River,” Simon added, “that wasn’t father who did that. It was me -- I’d pick it up fresh in the market on Fridays on the way home from school. Do you remember how --”

“My father used to read me bedtime stories too,” River ignored Simon’s comments as if she hadn’t even heard them. “He was always looking after me. He’d never want anyone to hurt me.”

Mal cocked an eyebrow at that, before turning his gaze on Simon, who was just sitting in his chair shaking his head.

“Way I heard it, little one, is that your brother...”

But River never let him finish. Instead she turned to face the kitchen door, a bright smile on her face. “Hello Jayne,” she chirped when the large Merc stomped into the room.

Jayne grunted as he made his way to the coffee pot, growling when he realized it was almost empty. “Gorramit,” he muttered. “Is it too much to ask a man be able to have fresh coffee in the morning without having to make it himself?”

“I can make coffee,” River offered, jumping up.

“So can Jayne,” Mal stated calmly. “Sit down and eat your breakfast.”

“I like to help,” she replied. “It makes me feel useful, like I’m part of the crew. A contributor; a piece of a well-oiled machine, like a working cog in a watch.”

“Be that as it may, Jayne can make his own coffee. Simon told us you had a rough night. Eat something.”

River’s face darkened at the mention of Simon’s name and she stared at him suspiciously. Simon smiled tentatively at her. “I’m surprised you’re awake so early.”

“Perhaps you didn’t drug me enough,” she offered tartly.

Everyone noticed the quick flash of hurt that traveled across Simon’s face. “River, you know that --”

“Don’t want to talk to you,” she interrupted.

Over at the oven, making a fresh pot of coffee, Jayne snickered. “Hey - she don't seem to like you too much today. Maybe she *is* sane. Wouldn’t want to claim you as family either, Doc.”

“That’s not funny, Jayne!” Kaylee immediately jumped to Simon’s defense, patting his arm reassuringly. “We all know she didn’t mean it.”

River snorted at that, but Kaylee ignored her. “We all seen how hard you work to make her better. No girl could ask for a better brother.”

River rolled her eyes. “What if he’s not making me better? What if he’s making me worse?”

They all turned to look at her. Jayne leaned a hip up against the counter by the stove and crossed his arms. “There’s something about you that’s different today, girl. Can’t rightly put my finger on it.”

“She seems slightly less crazy than normal?” Mal offered.

“Nope, that ain’t it.” The big Merc frowned and studied her a bit more intently. “You wearing make-up or something?”

River shook her head and smiled.

Jayne shrugged, “I’ll figure it out eventually. How long does it take a gorram pot of coffee to get done?”

“It depends on the amount of water in the pot and the temperature the water was before you started boiling it,” River offered. “Also, the flavor of the coffee plays an important role. If you like your coffee weak, it will be ready sooner - however, if you prefer your coffee strong -”

“Am I missing a science lesson?” Book queried as he entered the room. “Good morning, River -- you look lovely today. I almost didn’t recognize you with your hair pulled back off your face.”

Jayne snapped his fingers, “That’s it. You brushed your hair.”

“Oatmeal, Shepherd?” Kaylee offered, quickly rising and getting a bowl for him.

“Thank you, Kaylee,” Book replied.

“How come it’s alright for Kaylee to get Book a bowl of oatmeal, but when the *feng le* girl offers to make me a coffee, she ain’t allowed?” Jayne asked no one in particular, which was a good thing since they all chose to ignore him.

Shepherd bowed his head over his meal and said a quick prayer, before he looked back up and caught River’s eye.

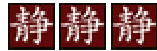
“Why are you thanking God for something that was flash-frozen and reconstituted in a factory?” she asked him seriously. “Or is praying another symbol, like your book and your hair?”

“It’s my way of communing with God and thanking Him for all His many blessings,” Book replied, smiling. “You see, River --”

“No preachifying at my table,” the Captain interrupted. “You want to talk God, go somewhere else. *Dong ma?*”

Book frowned slightly at that, but stopped talking. River leaned towards him and whispered, “We can talk about it later. You can even let your hair out, if you want. I realize now that you are not Sampson, and even if you were there is no Delilah on board.”

“Delilah,” Jayne muttered through a mouthful of food, “that’s a good name for a gun.”



Mal was down in the cargo bay a little later, restacking some crates and thinking when a sudden noise behind him made him jump.

“Captain?”

It was River, standing in the shadows and motioning him towards her. The girl had been following him around all morning, ever since he’d told everyone to stop with the chit-chat over breakfast and get to work.

Simon had wanted to take her back to the med-bay with him, but River had refused point blank. “No,” she had said stubbornly, “I’m not a pin-cushion, guinea pig, or voodoo doll, Geppetto. Today I want to be a real girl.”

It was almost as if she was scared of the Doc, which was odd. Normally he was the only one -- besides Kaylee -- she acted comfortable with. That had been changing, of course, ever since she had come up with the plan to rid the ship of the bounty hunter Jubal Early, but still, Mal didn’t recall the girl ever point blank telling her brother “No” before.

From the look on his face, it had shocked Simon as well. When it looked like he was about to argue with his sister, Mal had stepped in. “She seems fine, Doc. Better than normal even, if a mite more paranoid. Just leave her be. You should go back to your rooms and try to rest some - keep off of your leg. That’s an order.”

“But River --”

“She’ll be fine, won’t you little one? Ain’t no way she can get lost when we’re on this ship.”

“Okay,” Simon had reluctantly agreed. “But I’ll need to check her out later.”

“Later won’t be a problem,” Mal had replied.

He hadn’t expected the *feng le* girl would shadow him all morning though. He’d thought she’d go bother Kaylee or something, while her brother got some much-needed rest. Instead, every time he turned around, she was there.

“You know,” he offered as he walked over to her, “the sanity is nice, but the sticking to me like a leech is a mite irritating. Don’t you have someone else you can go bother? Thought I told you to go find Kaylee.”

“This girl needs to talk to you. But the walls have ears and there could be spies every where. There is someone on board who would keep me from telling you --”

“River?”

The girl froze when she heard her brother’s voice. “Don’t let him find me,” she whispered as she faded back into the shadows. Her eyes were wide with fright and her voice shook, in a way Mal had never heard before. “I don’t want him to hurt me.”

“Your brother would never --” Mal began, before he realized she was gone. He frowned at the shadows, wondering what was going on with the youngest of his crew, and tried to ignore the brief flare of worry that lit his belly.

With a shake of his head Mal turned back to the crates, and watched Simon’s limping progress towards him.

“Have you seen River?” the younger man asked.

“I thought I told you to get some sleep?” Mal countered. “What’s so pressing?”

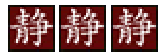
“I need to test her before the drugs start breaking down in her system,” Simon replied. “Besides, I’ve been in my quarters for the last forty-five minutes.”

“Did you sleep?”

He could tell the doc was debating whether or not to lie to him, before he offered a soft “No.”

“Didn’t think so. Let River be this morning. She’s saner than I ever seen her. You -- go get some rest. Don’t make me tell you again.”

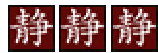
Mal watched with some amusement as the younger man bit back his retort and shuffled back towards his sleeping cabin, before he went back to stacking crates. He admired the Doc's devotion to his sister, but the girl was going to be the death of him.



River didn't know what to do. She had tried talking to the Captain alone several times now, to tell him. It seemed, however, that someone always managed to interrupt her - first it was Wash, wanting to go over the flight specs with him, then Zoe and Jayne, wanting to discuss the plans for the next drop. Finally, Simon had appeared. He was the last person River wanted around when she spoke with Mal.

She knew she wouldn't be able to avoid the man forever, but first she needed to let the captain know how much danger they were all in. Simon -- if that was really his name -- could not be trusted. Simon scared her, because when she looked at him she saw the brother she loved and not the man she knew he was. Her heart twisted in pain. Her brother was not her brother -- she was so confused. She choked back a whimper.

Sliding along the corridors, keeping to the shadows as much as she could, she finally reached Inara's shuttle. Knocking on the door, she managed a small relieved smile when it opened, before crumbling into the Companion's arms.



Inara sat on her knees before her small table, pouring herself tea. It wasn't that she was particularly thirsty or needed the practice but the ceremony was calming to her and she found that over the past few days, as she had tried to avoid the crew of Serenity and her captain, she needed something calming. She had told Mal she was planning on leaving Serenity and yet had been putting off the inevitable *when* of her departure, perhaps in some faint hope that he'd ask her to stay.

Of course, the one time they had gotten close to a confrontation she had quickly subverted the conversation so he couldn't get the words out. She thought she knew Mal's feelings, but if he said it she'd have to leave, and if she heard it she wouldn't want to. When the light, furtive knock rapped on her door her thoughts were so focused on Mal that for a second she thought it might be him. Her hand shivered holding the teapot and she quickly set it down, aghast at her slip. Mal rarely knocked and never so hesitantly.

Pulling her robe tighter around her, she opened the door and was surprised when River fell into her, thin arms wrapping around her neck as she started to cry.

"River...why...what ever is wrong?" Inara asked, immediately reaching around the younger woman and pulling her into the shuttle, shutting the door behind her as she did so. River continued to cry. All Inara could do was rock her and murmur soothingly until the young girl's tears had run their course.

Finally, after River's sobs had quieted to a couple of hitched breaths, Inara handed her a handkerchief to blow her nose and led her to the settee. "What's wrong?" she asked again. "Do you need me to go get Simon?"

River reared back, completely panicked at the mention of her brother's name. "No! Not Simon."

"He'll know how to help you better than I," Inara murmured. "I don't know why you're so upset."

"I need the Captain," River whispered back. "Have something to tell him -- secrets that could destroy him. Can't let Simon know."

Inara frowned at her. "What secrets?"

"For the captain to hear first," River replied. "He needs to decide. I don't know what to do and I trust him. He isn't one of them."

"One of who, River?"

"One of *them*. They poke me and open up my brain and dump themselves inside me. I can feel them all breathing. He needs to help me," she pleaded, searching Inara's face anxiously.

"We all want to help you, *mei-mei*" Inara replied gently. "That's why Simon..."

River started crying again, "Please, go get him. Go get the Captain. I need the Captain. Simon....Simon won't help me at all!"

The girl was shaking again, her eyes wild with fear and tears. Her hair, which had at some point been neatly pulled away from her face and brushed, had come loose from its moorings and now hung wildly about her shoulders. It was hard to ignore River's terror of Simon. Her reasons seemed lucid, although to Inara she had never looked more unstable.

She might not understand why River didn't want her brother, but she did understand that the girl seemed to know exactly what she did want for a change - and what she wanted was Mal. She was very adamant about that. A weird sense of dread filled Inara as she grabbed a rich chenille throw from the back of one of her chairs and wrapped it around the shaking girl.

"I'll go get Mal," she agreed. "Don't go anywhere. I'll be back."

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She found Mal in the cargo hold. From the looks of him, he'd been stacking crates not long ago. He was sweaty, his shirttails were pulled from the back of his pants and his suspenders hung loosely around his waist. The last time she had seen him so disheveled, he had just left Nandi's bed. She felt her heart clench slightly at the sight of him and almost turned to flee before she remembered what she'd come for.

"Mal." Her voice, spoken from behind him and from the shadows made him jump. "*Ai ya huai le*, what is it with people sneaking up behind me today?" he muttered as he turned to face her. He didn't look happy to see her. Inara bit back a sigh.

"I've come to ask you if you could come to my quarters with me for a while," she stated formally.

Mal cocked an eyebrow and his gaze grew suspicious. "For what?"

"I don't really know," Inara replied. Before she could continue, Mal interrupted her.

"You still planning on leaving us?"

Inara shrugged, "I've been researching my options."

"Right. So, you're leaving but you want me to come to your shuttle first. Is it because you want your last month's deposit back? 'Cause if it is, I gotta tell you right now you ain't getting it 'til your stuff is packed and gone."

"It's got nothing to do with my deposit at all," Inara snorted. "I just want..."

"One final cup of tea with me? Is that it? Only realizing now how much you're going to miss me?"

"You are impossible," Inara hissed. "I don't even know when I'm leaving yet."

"And there's another thing," Mal nodded, "I'll need a date. So I can start making plans on renting out your shuttle again. If you're going to go, it's better you do it quick, like a bandage, *dong ma*? The longer you dawdle, the more hurt Kaylee will be when you leave."

Inara could feel the blood rising to her face and had to forcibly will herself to calm down. Mal always did this. He had the ability to crawl under her skin like a burr and get her so angry she couldn't think straight.

"*Gao yang jong duh goo yang*, River is in my shuttle, practically hysterical, and you're the only person she wants to talk too."

Mal blinked at that. "Why? I ain't her brother."



“I don’t know why, she won’t tell me. But I promised her I would get you and not Simon. She’s crying and she doesn’t want to see him.”

“I know. Seems she’s been trying to ignore or avoid him since breakfast time.”

“So, you’ll come then?”

“Don’t have much choice in the matter, do I? After all, it’s the Captain’s job to make sure his *passengers* ain’t bothered, especially when they pay as well as you’ve been. I’ll come take her out of your hair.”

Inara frowned at him, before spinning on her heel and muttering under her breath, “You’re a real bastard, you know that?”

*“I know it,”* he thought sardonically to himself as he followed her up the stairs and across the catwalk to her shuttle, *“a real bastard.”*



“Zoe!” Mal’s loud bellow as he burst from Inara’s shuttle echoed throughout the ship. Jayne, who was trying to write a letter home to his Ma, heard it. He quickly dropped his pencil and grabbed one of his guns.

Kaylee, in the engine room, heard it over the hum of the ship’s engines and immediately thought that something bad had happened -- like, another bounty-hunter trying to board *Serenity*. Wiping her hands across the front of her overalls, she ran for the kitchen. She had seen Book in there earlier, and from the sound of Mal’s voice, Kaylee didn’t want to be alone right now.

In the kitchen, both Inara and Book stopped their easy conversation and looked up. Inara’s face was composed as she murmured, “I suppose he didn’t like whatever secret River told him.”

Book agreed, “Most people don’t like other people’s secrets.”

They both stood and walked to the door, looking out into the hallway. “I guess we’ll find out what’s going on soon enough,” Book stated.

“Not me,” Inara replied. “I’ve had enough drama for one day, thank you. I think I’ll go back to my shuttle now that he’s obviously left it.”

Zoe, who had been with Wash in the cockpit, heard Mal’s cry and immediately recognized it for what it was: a call to arms.

“*Tian xiao de*,” she muttered, as she pulled the gun from her hip and quickly unlatched the safety and moved out into the hallway. Behind her, Wash flipped the ship into autopilot and followed. They met Mal on the catwalk between the passenger quarters and the cargo bay.

“Sir?” Zoe nodded when she saw him.

Behind them, Jayne was clattering up the stairs from the crew quarters, a large semi-automatic clutched in his hands. “Is it another uninvited visitor?” he asked.

“You could say that,” Mal agreed darkly. “You pick up those cuffs I asked you get on Persephone last time we was there, Jayne?”

The large Merc nodded. “They’re in my bunk.”

“Good -- get them. Wash -- stay back. Don’t let anyone else come through here until Zoe and I get back, *dong ma?*”

Wash nodded, trying not to look nervous. “What’s going on, Captain?”

Mal shook his head. “Hopefully nothing that we can’t contain,” he muttered darkly. “Zoe - come with me. We’re going to pay the good doctor a little visit.”



Simon was following Captain’s orders, sleeping in his bunk, when Mal and Zoe burst in on him, guns drawn.

It took him a few groggy moments before he realized neither was smiling at him, and a few seconds longer before he realized that each held a gun on him.

“What’s going on?” he mumbled as he rubbed his eyes in confusion. “Is there something wrong with River?”

“Nothing shoving you out an airlock won’t cure,” Mal gritted back. His eyes were colder than ice. “Zoe, search his things.”

“What am I looking for, Sir?” Zoe replied.

“Anything that will link him to the Alliance,” the Captain replied.

“The Alliance?” Simon squeaked out. “Me? What’s going on?”

“Why don’t you tell me, Doc? Seems you ain’t been completely honest with us about who you are.”

Simon looked at Mal in confusion, before he eyed Zoe warily as she went through his drawers. "I don't know what you're talking about," he replied. "I've told you everything you've ever asked me."

"You've told me lots of things," Mal agreed, "but I have to ask myself how much of it was the truth."

Zoe was in the closet now, removing the large trunk Simon had stored in there on the floor. It was locked, of course, and before Simon could tell her where the key was she had knocked the lock off with the butt of her gun.

"Well, lookie here," she whistled under her breath as she lifted a grey Alliance uniform from underneath a pile of Simon's vests. "Seems River might have been telling you the truth after all, Sir."

"River?" Simon blanched when Zoe and Mal both turned murderous eyes on him. "But she knows -- I'm not...that's the costume I used when I rescued her from the Academy! I'm not..."

"Shut up," Mal hissed, "and follow me."



When they reached the dining area, Mal took the handcuffs from Jayne and cuffed Simon to the chair.

River was there, watching him. Her face was drawn and pale, and her eyes glowed with both triumph and pain when she saw him. Her smile and relief had been so genuine when she had seen the Captain bring him in at gun point, Simon had wanted to cry out at seeing it.

Kaylee was beside herself. "What are you doing?" she had asked the captain. "Why do you and Zoe have a gun pointed at Simon?"

"He's with the Alliance," Mal muttered darkly.

"I am not!" Simon protested, but Zoe cut him off by showing everyone the uniform she had folded over her arm.

"We found this in his room, hidden in the closet."

"It wasn't hidden!" Simon protested. "It was in my trunk."

"Which was locked," Zoe agreed coldly, "and hidden in your closet."

Everyone was looking at Simon now, waiting to see what he'd say. "I'm not with the Alliance," he murmured. "They're trying to kill River and me, remember? You've all seen the warrants."

"Maybe those warrants are all part of your cover," Mal replied. "Maybe they're only on the Cortex to make us think you're a fugitive."

"I don't believe it," Kaylee declared again. "Simon ain't a purple-belly, Cap'n. He just can't be! What ever put such a crazy idea in your head in the first place?"

"River told me. Simon ain't her brother, Kaylee. Don't matter what he's told you -- and us -- it's all been lies."

"River?" Simon looked at his sister brokenly. "Why would you tell the captain that, *mei-mei*? After everything I've done to get you free and keep you safe, why would you lie?"

"You're one of them, Simon," River whispered back. "I remembered in my dreams. You were there! You're testing me for them. I don't have a brother -- they only made me think that I did."

Simon hung his head at that. Her words cut him to the quick, but all Mal saw in his face was defeat. "You can't deny it, can you?"

"Of course I can deny it," Simon replied. "The question is, will you believe me or have you already made up your mind?"

"This is stupid," Jayne offered suddenly from the doorway. "No way is the Doc with the Alliance. I was with them on Ariel, 'member? Those officers treated him just as bad as they treated me 'n moon brain. Why the hell would y'believe a word she says, when she's always been crazy?"

"You sticking up for him, Jayne?" Mal asked incredulously. "Ain't you been wanting them off the ship since they got on?"

Jayne shrugged, "Yeah. So what? I want them off the ship, captain. Not just Simon. *Them*. 'Sides, I'd trust the Doc more'n I'd trust *her*. All she's ever done is cut me up, but him? He ain't never hurt me, even when he had reason to."

Mal glared at him. "I can't take any chances with my crew. What if he is Alliance, huh? What then? We keep him here and he turns us all in? Slits our throats in our sleep?"

"If he wanted you dead, he could have done it a long time ago," Wash broke in. "He's had plenty of opportunity to just let you die, what with the large target that seems to be painted on your back lately."

“Perhaps he didn’t want to blow his cover,” Zoe replied coldly.

“What cover?” Simon laughed weakly at that. “Perhaps me getting shot in the leg was part of that cover as well?”

“How do you explain the Alliance uniform?” Mal demanded.

“I already told you, it was part of the costume I needed to get River out. The men that helped me free her - they got it for me. I paid them for it, like we paid for the EMT uniforms you wore on Ariel.”

“This is a *real* uniform,” Zoe muttered. “Would have cost thousands of credits. It’s not some cheap knock-off.”

“I was a rich man,” Simon replied resignedly. “Not that it matters much now.”

“When you first came onboard, you told us other people got her out and delivered her to you.” Mal’s voice was deadly. “You been lying to us from the get go.”

Simon sighed and hung his head at that. “It was bad enough when you thought I hadn’t been directly involved in her retrieval. If I had told you I was the one that went in to get her, you would have kicked us both off the ship.”

The captain frowned, “It wouldn’t have made a difference. Thought you were ‘fugies already anyway.” He paused, considering the younger man, before asking, “Why would River say you weren’t her brother?”

The younger man looked at his sister and blinked back the tears this question provoked. “I don’t know. I was hoping...I thought she was getting better. She seemed better this morning, especially after last night. I thought she was having an adverse reaction to the meds I gave her - remember? I told you this morning that...” He paused and blinked. “Maybe...it’s the drugs I gave her. They seem to have made her more lucid, but they’ve also made her paranoid. It’s the drugs. It has to be -- they’re making her hallucinate.”

Mal looked at him skeptically, before turning to River. “You seeing pink elephants, girl? Flying rainbows? Anything you shouldn’t be seeing?” River shook her head no. He turned back to Simon. “She says she ain’t hallucinating, so who am I supposed to believe, huh? You? Or River? I’ve made too many mistakes already to make any more. If you can’t prove that you are who you say you are...”

“I understand,” Simon murmured shakily. “You’ll kill me.”

“The evidence you have right now is all circumstantial,” Book offered calmly. “None of it would stand up in a court of law.”

"I know," Mal replied. "That's the only reason he ain't already been shoved out the air lock." He looked at the younger man, before letting his gaze slide over to River who was sitting miserably on the table watching Simon. "I won't let anyone hurt her no more," he murmured. "Especially not you."

"I understand," Simon agreed again. "I don't want anyone to hurt her anymore either. But this - if you kill me - it will hurt her, more than you could possibly know. When she remembers I am her brother again...when she realizes what she's done..."

Mal contemplated him for a moment, before turning to Zoe.

"Stick him in the pantry, and keep guard. I need to think."

"Yes Sir," she replied. "How long?"

Mal shrugged at that, "Not too long."



River Tam was dreaming, and she wanted to wake up. She had left the kitchen after Zoe had locked Simon in the pantry, not sure where to go or what to do. Kaylee had looked at her, eyes wide and accusing, and River knew her friend didn't understand what was happening.

Her eyes burned from holding back the tears behind her lids -- Simon had looked so hurt and she had thought he was her brother for so long. Her first instinct had been to stand up and say that she was wrong; had made it up; Simon loved her. She felt like a large piece of her was missing -- since arriving on Serenity she had always seen herself in certain terms and Simon had had a large role in helping her establish her identity. She was Simon's sister -- the Doc's crazy little *mei-mei*. Now that he was no longer her brother and she was no longer a sister, she didn't know who she was anymore.

Simon's large trunk was still sitting open in the middle of the floor when she reached his quarters. The rich fabrics and shiny brocades of his vests, folded neatly inside it, mocked her. Growling her pain and anger, she grabbed the vest nearest the top and started ripping at it. Soon, it hung in her hands. Tattered. Ripped. Shredded. Like her life ever since she had woken up this morning and realized she had never had a brother.

The next vest was one of Simon's favorites: a rich red brocade, shot through with black and gold silk. River didn't realize she was crying until she picked it up and started pulling the buttons from it.

*'Mother bought him this vest,' she thought to herself, 'it's always been his favorite.'* Button one - off. *'Or it would have been his favorite, if he was really my brother, which he's not.'* Button two went flying across the room. *'How did they give me memories of people and events that don't really exist?'*

She couldn't bring herself to rip the fabric. Instead, she slid her arms into it and pulled it tight around her, imagining Simon was hugging her like he had last night. She had always viewed him as her safety - her touchstone. It seemed to her she had always known that no matter where she was, Simon would always love her. She had counted on him more than she could even really understand, and now -- to realize that none of it was true -- that it had all been a lie...she felt as if the very fabric of her being had been torn away.

Her tears flowed in earnest. She didn't know who she was, or what she was or why she was. She only knew she wanted her brother back; at the very least, she wanted the pretense of her brother back. The 'Verse was an awfully big place not to have family in -- because, if Simon wasn't her brother, where did that leave her? Who would take care of her as she fought the demons in her mind? Who would ever love her, when she was so broken?

Slumping into the bed Simon had been resting in earlier, River Tam cried until she fell asleep.



"This is going to hurt, *mei-mei*." Simon's voice is soft as he rips open an antiseptic wipe. Leaning over, he studies her knee and very gently pulls another small piece of gravel from it, before blowing on it. He always does that -- blows on her cuts and scrapes before he cleans them. He thinks it makes the actual sting of the peroxide less, when in actuality it doesn't. She doesn't tell him this though, because his gentle concern makes her heart feel better.

His hair is dark and shiny, and he smells warm and clean and so much like hers she almost cries with joy. He applies the bandage he'd set aside and smiles at her. He's such a wonderful older brother. River knows Simon loves her very much - more than anyone else in the family does. She can feel it pouring off him in waves and her little girl heart revels in the safety and comfort and unconditional love he wraps her in. She smiles at him tremulously when he wipes her tears away with his thumbs. "No more crying, okay?"

*Flicker.*

"Okay, daddy," River replies. Her father sighs, kisses the bandage he just put on her skinned knee and hugs her, but he feels insubstantial, like he's not really there. She looks at him closely and wonders why he looks so faded, like an old capture left out in the sun. When she tries to see what he's feeling, she gets nothing - only static. She wishes Simon were there. She wishes she weren't an only child.

*Flicker.*

"I prefer the original ending to this story," River whispers against Simon's shoulder, "even if it is sad."



“You would,” Simon smiles against her hair. “You’re a morbid little girl.”

River sighs happily at this. Her big brother is home from school until Monday and she has someone to read her bedtime stories again. She could read them herself - she often does, when Simon is away - but the stories are never as good without him. She thinks these are the times when she is happiest -- when Simon is with her, reading her stories and tucking her into bed. She feels like someone loves her when he is here. The house isn’t as cold or as empty.

He’s holding a pad in his hands and they are both looking at a picture of the Little Mermaid throwing herself into the sea to meet her death because she can’t bring herself to kill her Prince.

“Why do some people think they can re-write stories,” she asks him seriously.  
“Especially when the original endings are more true? Do they think it’s that easy to make us forget things?”

*Flicker.*

Mal smiles at her sadly. “Most people prefer happy endings, little girl. They don’t want to believe that bad things actually happen.”

Her eyes fill with tears as she studies his serious face, notes the sadness in his gaze and the small lines around his eyes that speak to her of pain too great to bear, or to bare, for that matter. She wants to cry against his shoulder and ask him why, if he read her stories when she was just a little girl, he couldn’t have rescued her from the Alliance sooner. She doesn’t though, because he already has enough guilt inside him and she doesn’t want to add more. Still she wonders. She thinks, if she’d had a brother, he would have been there sooner.

“It’s not fair,” she whispers. “It’s not fair.”

*Flicker.*

She is hiding in a small dark room. Her arms are wrapped tightly around her knees and she is hunched into a ball. Her heart is pounding so loudly she’s afraid it might be echoing like a drum in the silence around her. She almost can’t hear Simon calling for her over the beat of it.

“River,” his voice is angry: hot and cold at the same time. “You can’t hide, River. You belong here and you’ll never escape. No one will help you.”

She bites her tongue until it bleeds and holds back her squeak of fear, willing herself to fade into the black around her. He will find her and he will hurt her. She tries to calm her breathing and sits still as a stone, casting her mind outwards, trying to feel him. She doesn't know where he is. She doesn't know.

A small blue glow lights the dark in front of her face. Simon bends at the waist to look at her. He is wearing blue gloves. He is not Simon.

*Flicker.*

River Tam is screaming her brother's name, over and over, until her throat is raw. She is back in the Blue Room and Dr. Mathias is frowning at her over the shoulder of another man. His face is gaunt - almost skeletal - and his eyes stab at her worse than the needles.

"I thought you said she'd forgotten about him?" he states calmly. His words are like ice though, flaying at her skin. She wishes she could close her eyes and stop looking at him, but her lids are being held open by tiny silver clamps.

"We're working on it," Mathias replies. "It's not easy removing a whole person from someone's memories. We have to be careful how we go about doing it -- if we take the wrong memories, we could make her completely useless for the program."

River cries out as another man steps into her peripheral vision. He is bigger than the first Blue Hands, but his eyes are just as cold and empty. "That's not acceptable, Dr. Mathias. These memories of her brother are holding back her training. They need to be extricated. She needs to realize that there is no one who will save her. As long as she believes the possibility exists, she will never be fully ours."

"I understand," the doctor replies. His eyes glance downwards warily as he notes the small rod the second man has pulled from his pocket.

"Do you? Perhaps a little incentive would give you the impetus you need to work on this problem a little more seriously." A blue finger touches a switch, and one side starts pulsing.

Mathias drops to his knees, holding his hands against his ears. He has learned, like River, not to scream when the Blue Hands punish them. Screaming only increases their pleasure.

*Flicker.*

She is alone, hiding again, only this time she isn't scared. Simon is coming to find her and she is happy. She giggles against her hand and squishes down into the corner of the closet. She imagines herself as a mouse, tiny and hidden. Simon will never look for her here.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are,” his voice is teasing and warm, and she giggles again. “Where are you, little mouse? I’m going to find you!”

She hears his footsteps move closer and she giggles again. They pause. “Are you hiding in the closet?”

She shuts her eyes against the sudden light as the doors open. Even so, his image is burned against her eyelids.

“Simon, you found me!” she laughs as she opens her eyes.

*Flicker.*

It is Kaylee smiling at her. Kaylee, her friend. Kaylee. Not Simon. Never Simon again, because River denied him and said she didn’t have a brother.

She wakes up screaming his name.



Mal stood on the catwalk, arms hanging over the top railing, and studied the cargo hold below.

The doctor was in custody, locked up in the pantry. The younger man hadn’t argued as fiercely as Mal had thought he would nor had he denied the accusations against him strenuously. It made the captain more prone to believing what River had told him was true. It was the uniform, however, that really helped crystallize the idea of Simon as Alliance in Mal’s mind.

The very idea made him sick: sick and angry.

He remembered the first time he had seen the younger man, all dressed up in his fussy suit looking impossibly proper and cold. He hadn’t liked him at all.

He had liked him even less when he realized someone had been trying to send the Alliance coded messages. It hadn’t even occurred to him that it was one of the other passengers either -- Dr. Tam had made Mal uncomfortable right from the start.

Mal shook his head and growled in frustration. He should know by now to trust his gut instincts. The doctor had done nothing to endear himself to Mal when it had turned out Hodges had been the one sending the messages. He had been willing to let Kaylee die of a gut-shot wound. He’d been demanding and pushy and arrogant. Mal hadn’t liked him.

Except, that wasn't entirely true -- at least, not anymore. Simon had grown on him these last few months. Mal had to admire the way the younger man was so dedicated to helping his sister. The way the doc had told it, he'd given up everything in order to get River away from that Academy she'd been at. Mal had seen the way he worried and fretted over the girl; the tender expression in his eyes when River was happy; the despair when River was not.

Mal scowled again and tried to wrap his mind around the idea that Simon had been playing them all along. He didn't like thinking that he was such a soft touch; that he couldn't spot a danger from a mile away, but perhaps he was only deluding himself. Perhaps the doc had been fooling them all along -- it wasn't outside the realm of impossibility. As a matter of fact, it could easily be true -- but how would he ever know?

When it was boiled down to the heart of the matter, all Mal knew was he had to protect his crew and his ship. He couldn't take any more chances with them. Keeping Simon and River Tam on board when he thought they were 'fugies was bad enough -- keeping Simon on board when he could be an Alliance spy? That was another matter all together.

His mind chased itself in circles, trying to figure it all out. River was just a girl -- a crazy girl to boot -- but there was no denying that bad things had been done to her. Sometimes just looking at her hurt him -- there was no way a girl should have to go through what she had. She brought all his protective instincts to the forefront -- had from the minute he had seen her lying in the cryo-chamber all cold and lifeless. He didn't want to see her hurt any more.

And the doc -- Simon -- he had saved their lives on a few occasions. Jayne had been right about that. The boy did have a mind for criminal plotting, too. Of course, if he was an Alliance spy, that would explain that. It was hard for Mal to reconcile the young man that stuttered and turned all different shades of red when he tried to talk to Kaylee to the idea that he was some trained Alliance agent. If he was, he must be a damn good actor. Mal never would have suspected he wasn't what he said he was.

Still, he didn't fully believe it, truth be told. But he had to decide something, and the Alliance uniform, that was a big strike against the truth as Simon saw fit to tell it. Sighing, he dropped his head down and cradled it against his hands. He couldn't take any chances. And if it came down to making a decision between what his head told him and what his heart did -- he'd chose his head every time. His heart had gotten him in way more trouble over the course of his life.

He knew what he had to do. He just hoped that, if he was wrong, he'd never find out about it.

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He had lost everything. Sitting in the dark pantry with Zoe standing guard just outside the door, Simon realized he was going to die. He even understood why he was going to die, but the understanding didn't make it any easier for him.

All he'd ever wanted was for River to be safe. It was his sole reason for being -- he'd given up everything he had and everything he was to get her away from the people who were hurting her. And now, she thought he was one of them.

He wondered where he'd gone wrong -- what had led to this stunning leap in River's logic? From a completely clinical level, it was obvious the drug combination he'd given her last night was at fault. It stabilized her thinking but made her paranoid. So, even though she appeared saner and sounded saner, it was all just an illusion. Simon tried not to let the fact that she had decided to turn that paranoia on him hurt. She couldn't be blamed. It wasn't her fault. It wasn't.

And yet...how much more did he need to suffer? What else could he afford to lose for her? Even though he understood that she didn't know what she was doing to him, his heart was still broken. She had betrayed him - and he had *never* betrayed her.

River had been special from the moment she was born - his beautiful, brilliant, little *mei-mei*. He had loved her from the minute she had first opened her big baby eyes and focused intently on his face, before spitting up all over him.

Over the years, as they grew up, he had gladly taken on the role as brother, father, friend, and confidant. He had been everything for her and she had been everything for him. They were all the family the other had ever needed. It had been Simon she had shared her secrets with before she went to the Academy. It had been Simon she had sent the letters to, knowing that he would figure out the code. It had been Simon she had relied on to save her.

And now, it was Simon she had turned on. Simon, who had always said he would die for her. He had never expected she would actually be the one to kill him though.

His one consolation was that she was safe. He knew that Mal -- the captain -- would look after her. Wasn't that what he was already doing? Listening to River and trying to do what he thought best? Protecting her?

He was glad for that at least, even if he was angry that Mal seemed so willing to believe the worst of him. He'd thought -- *hoped* -- that he'd found a home here for both River and himself. It had taken a while to get used to his sudden fall in fortune; to get used to the lack of regular showers and books and money; to get used to the dirt and the noise and the way they barely scraped by. But he had gotten used to it -- was even growing to love it. He'd started viewing Serenity and her crew as his new home, his new family - one that was better than the one he'd left behind in his flight with his precious *mei-mei*.. And now that family was betraying him too.

Leaning his head back against the wall, shifting and willing feeling into his cuffed hands, Simon closed his eyes and tried not to be too scared.

He didn't mind dying so much. He just hoped that when River realized what she had done, the knowledge didn't kill her.

静静静

Wash watched Mal leave the kitchen before turning to look at his wife, frowning. "You aren't going to let him kill Simon, are you?"

Across the table from him, Kaylee gasped in dismay. Wash didn't need to look at her to know she had tears in her eye. Zoe just shrugged.

"We can't have an Alliance spy on board," she replied tersely.

"I'm not disagreeing with you," Wash retorted, "but we don't even know if he is a spy. Murdering him can't be the only option."

"He ain't a spy," Kaylee offered, her voice wavering. "He just ain't!"

"We can't keep him locked up in the pantry indefinitely," Zoe remarked quietly. "And we can't just leave him planet-side somewhere - he knows too much about us. If he is a spy, he'd have the Alliance on us in no time flat."

"If -- you said if!" Wash shot back. He ran his hands through his hair and shook his head. "Why are we always so quick to resort to violence on this ship? This is Simon, Zoe -- *Simon*! He saved your life, and you're going to let Mal suck him out the airlock?"

"He might be a spy."

"Might -- that's the operative word here. He might be a fairy princess, too!"

Jayne snickered at that, "I'd believe the fairy princess more."

Wash threw his hands up in the air, "It's scary when Jayne becomes the voice of reason on this boat."

Jayne shrugged, "Ain't paid to think or to have an opinion -- but the Doc being a spy? Ain't no way."

Kaylee looked at Jayne hopefully, "That mean you won't let Mal kill him, Jayne?"

The big Merc shrugged, "Don't mean that at all, little Kaylee. I got a good berth here; ain't about to screw that up for some prissy Core-boy bit off more than he could chew. It's Mal's boat; he's the captain."

“You’d let him kill Simon, even though you know he’s innocent?” Kaylee was outraged.

“Don’t know nothing, girl. Only think it -- and, like I said, I ain’t paid to think. Mal’ll do what he wants, with or without my input. Ain’t my job to stop him.”

Zoe nodded tersely at that, “Smartest thing you ever said, Jayne. Captain wouldn’t put up with a mutiny.”

Hell, you see a mutiny here, Zoe?” Jayne asked. “Shepherd ain’t even looked up from his gorram Bible, and Kaylee and Wash - they’re just talking. No one’s plotting nothing. Gotta wonder though, what Mal would do if River suddenly decides that Book’s with the Alliance, or I am. Seems he’s mighty quick to believe something that don’t make no sense.”

“But you ain’t going to interfere.” It wasn’t even a question Zoe asked him, more a statement of fact. Jayne looked at Kaylee, then at Wash, before shaking his head.

“Nope. I don’t aim on being sucked out the airlock with him.”

“This is insane,” Wash bit out. “Simon hasn’t done anything!” He looked at Zoe, eyes miserable. “Do I even know you?”

“Wash --” Zoe started replying, but Wash interrupted her.

“Don’t. Just -- don’t, Zoe. Guess I better get back to flying this ship, before Mal decides I’m a spy, too.”

Zoe frowned at that, but didn’t try to say anything more as he stormed from the kitchen. Kaylee watched him go, before turning to look at Jayne and then Zoe, eyes swimming with tears and face anguished.

“I thought we had each other’s backs,” she murmured sadly. “Can’t believe I was so wrong.”

Zoe looked at Book as Kaylee departed. “Got anything you want to add to that, Shepherd?”

Book shook his head, “I can understand the danger. I just hope that the captain thinks things through before acting in his usual rash manner.”

“Like that’ll ever happen,” Jayne snorted.





Inara was in her shuttle reading a book of Chinese poetry, quite unaware of anything that was going on. After her run in with Mal earlier that morning, she had decided that whatever was happening on ship didn't concern her. When Mal had been hollering for Zoe, Inara had returned to her shuttle, shut the door and decided she'd spend the rest of the day there until whatever was going on had blown over.

It wasn't worth getting involved in, because involvement meant eventually getting insulted by Mal. She didn't want to open herself up to that anymore, because -- despite the facade she tried to maintain when they argued -- every word he said to her in anger cut her to the quick. He was unlike anyone she had ever met, but she had already spent too much time trying to figure him out. She had already allowed him too much leeway in his dealings with her.

She was so invested in trying to convince herself she wasn't the slightest bit curious as to what was going on that it took her a few minutes to register the knocking on her door.

It was more frantic than River's knocking had been earlier that day but, once again, Inara knew it wasn't Mal's. With a sigh, she slid a ribbon into her book to mark her place and rose to her feet.

When she opened the door this time, it was Kaylee that fell into her.

"Inara...you gotta help. He's gonna kill him, I really think he's gonna!" The younger girl looked awful. Her face was streaked with tears and the normal grime from the engine and her nose was red and running. It took a couple of seconds for Inara to understand what she had just said.

"What? Who's going to kill who?"

"Mal -- he's gonna kill Simon. You've got to talk to him!"

Inara blinked at Kaylee in shock. "Come in and sit down. What's going on? Why would Mal kill Simon?" As she spoke she moved further into her shuttle, grabbing a soft linen cloth from a small shelf and dampening it with the cleansing oils she used for her daily ablutions. This one smelled of almond and camphor, a combination she had always found calming. Turning back to Kaylee, she reached out and gently wiped the girl's face. "Now, tell me what's going on."

Kaylee visibly relaxed under the ministrations, but didn't stop crying. Reaching a hand up, she gripped Inara's wrist tightly. "River -- she told Mal that Simon isn't her brother. She said he was Alliance! The cap'n -- he found an Alliance uniform in Simon's bunk. Simon says he has it from helping get River out, but the cap'n ain't too inclined to believe him. I think he's gonna shove Simon outta the airlock."

Inara looked at Kaylee in shock, before stating flatly, "He wouldn't."

Kaylee just looked at her and Inara shivered as a cold dread filled her. He would, she realized with sudden clarity. Mal would do it, if he thought it was true. He'd do it even if there were only a *possibility* it was true, because he wouldn't risk his ship or anyone on it. She reached out and squeezed Kaylee's hand. "Oh *ren-ci de Fo-zu!* That *ben tian-sheng de yi-dui-rou.*"

"Inara, what are we going to do?" Kaylee was starting to panic again. "We can't let him just -- kill Simon. He ain't Alliance. He can't be -- can he?"

"Definitely not," Inara returned. Releasing Kaylee's hand she looked around her room, her fluid movements belying her trepidation.

She couldn't let Mal kill Simon because eventually he would realize he'd made a mistake, and he already had the memories of enough dead weighing him down. A ripple of uneasiness fluttered in her belly. Mal would never forgive her for interfering -- and yet...she had no choice.



River had woken up, tangled in the sheets on Simon's bed, sobbing his name. Her mind was fractured, her thoughts ephemeral as she reached out blindly for him, seeking his presence and the solid comfort of his arms.

She had had the most awful dream -- the ones with the Blue Room in them were always the worst -- and right now, all she wanted was her brother. He would chase away the ghosts and make her feel safe.

He wasn't there, though.

It took her a few minutes to register this and even longer before she realized he wasn't coming. Where was he? He had always been there for her before -- he was the only person in her life she could count on. Where was he?

Sliding to her feet, blinking through her tears, she saw one of his vests lying in tatters on the floor. What was it doing there? A brief flash of memory slid across her mind -- Jubal Early, looking shocked as Mal had pushed him out into the black -- and she thought for exactly eight-tenths of a second that perhaps he had somehow returned. And then the thought was gone.

She picked up the tattered vest and pressed it against her chest. She felt like she was drowning. Her dreams and memories battered at her like waves, threatening to drag her under. All the whispers in her head were so loud it hurt to think -- but she needed to. She needed to concentrate and shut them away, like they had forced her to shut things away in the Blue Room. She needed to shut them away and open up the other part of her brain -- she needed to find Simon.

Her jerky movements calmed somewhat as she slowed down her breathing -- in, out, in, out -- and let the first tendrils of her consciousness unfurl, stretching out like filament as she looked for her brother.

She found Mal first, on the catwalk. His anger and confusion blanketed him in a black cloud and mentally she shied away from him -- he was battling demons again today.

Wash was flying Serenity, but he was agitated and Serenity knew it -- could feel it through his jerky movements and the way his strong hands twitched against the controls.

Kaylee was in Inara's shuttle and the older woman was trying to comfort her. River did not let her thoughts stay with them too long -- both women were upset. She allowed herself to wonder if Simon had been the cause of Kaylee's tears -- he usually was. Inara - well, she was harder to read, but her anger at Mal was so sharp it poked River like pins.

The rest of them were in the galley. Book was reading his Bible, but he wasn't concentrating on it the way he normally did -- instead, he was thinking of Cain and Able, and how easy it was for family to betray each other, and wondering why Simon was Able.

Jayne -- not much there. The usual: food, guns, women; but underneath it all a sense of disbelief. Simon?

Zoe was calm, as always, like a cool forest pool, all hidden depths and dangers. River rarely broke the surface of that calm facade because she knew that even the calmest of lakes could drown you.

Simon was there too, just behind Zoe. Waves of despair and hopelessness rolled from him. His thoughts, as always, centered on her: what had happened to her; why she was doing this; who would ever look after her the way he did once he was gone...how she could ever believe he wasn't her brother...?

River was running before that last thought had even solidified in her mind.

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Mal was putting off the inevitable and he knew it. Wasn't like him -- he was a man of action. He needed to act.

Pushing himself away from the railings, Mal turned towards the kitchen. It wouldn't make any difference how many times he turned this over in his mind -- he couldn't take any chances. In the end, the question everything boiled down to was this: was he willing to risk his ship and his crew on the fact that Simon might be a spy?

The answer was an unequivocal no.

He hadn't made it even halfway to the galley before he heard the yelling.

"Simon! Simon, help me..."

It was River, and from the sounds of things she was in full breakdown mode. Putting a little hustle into his steps, Mal rushed through the doorway and noticed Wash rush in from the other direction. From Wash, his gaze went immediately to Zoe, standing in front of the door to the pantry area. Her arms were crossed and her expression was flat, even though her obsidian eyes glinted with concern.

River was on her knees in front of his first officer, looking like a harpy from one of those old Earth-that-Was myths. She was wearing one of Simon's fancy vests and holding another -- ripped to pieces -- tightly against her body.

She was crying like someone had just ripped her heart out.

"*Wo de ma!*" he exclaimed, nodding at Zoe but making his way over to River. "What's going on, little girl?"

"Simon..." she wailed. Mal frowned, reaching out a hand and tentatively touching her head.

"He won't hurt you no more, I promise."

"He doesn't!" River cried, "He doesn't! Please, you've got to help him..."

Mal looked at Zoe and cocked an eyebrow, but Zoe just shrugged.

"I can't help him, darlin'."

"But I need him," River wailed, "He's my brother."

From the table, Jayne snorted. "Told ya!" Mal ignored him.

"How can you be sure?" he asked the girl crying at his feet instead. "You done told me this morning..."

"If you take her brother away, she will fracture," she interrupted her voice desolate. "She is losing herself already. Without her brother she will never remember who she was; she'll always be what she is now."

Mal ran a hand through his hair and frowned, casting a quick glance at Jayne and then at Book, who was watching him intently.

"Seems to me River is recanting her story," the older man offered. "Think you should let Simon go, Mal."

Before he could respond Kaylee burst into the kitchen, Inara gliding serenely behind her.

“Mal, you can’t do this.” The companion’s voice was haughty and commanding. It made him grit his teeth and stand taller.

“You don’t give commands on my ship, Inara. Zoe --” he barked, “bring him.”

Mal looked at the people around him, before he looked back at Inara. He could hear Zoe helping Simon to his feet. “You all know I ain’t got no choice in the matter. We don’t know if River was telling the truth earlier or if she’s telling the truth now, and I ain’t about to take any chances.”

“It’s murder,” Wash stated. “Plain and simple: it’s murder.”

“It ain’t murder,” Mal retorted, “it’s self-defense.”

“But Simon ain’t done nothing!” Kaylee cried.

“You want to wait ‘til he does? It will be too late then, little Kaylee. We’ll all be dead.”

Zoe moved into his peripheral vision, Simon held firmly in front of her. The younger man was pale and Mal knew he had to be scared, but he held himself straight. Mal hated the twinge of regret he felt when he looked at him.

“Don’t have a choice,” he stated calmly, almost as if he was trying to explain himself to Simon.

The doc nodded, “You’re just trying to protect your crew. I understand. Doesn’t mean you aren’t making a mistake though.”

“That may be,” Mal agreed, “but it’s a mistake I’m willing to make.”

River was standing now, her shoulders bowed and her head down. “Simon...I can’t...I’m...”

“*Mei-Mei*,” Simon interrupted. “It’s alright. I know...the captain will look after you.”

Mal started at this, before nodding. “That’s what I aim to do.”

“I know.” Simon looked him in the eyes. “You once promised me that if you ever decided to kill me, you’d do it facing me with a gun.”

“Yes, I did,” Mal agreed.

“Mal, you really can’t do this.” It was Inara again, her voice shaking.

“Already told you I ain’t got no choice in the matter,” Mal replied. “Ain’t no proof...”

“There is, though,” Inara replied. “He isn’t Alliance, Mal. I know...” she paused, hesitating over her words, before rushing on. “He was my...doctor...about three years ago, on Osiris.”

Silence descended and then Jayne grinned. “Doc, you seen ‘Nara naked?”

“What?” Mal’s voice, quiet and deadly, drowned out any response Inara might have made to that.

“I’ve met Simon before, on Osiris. He...I...he was my surgeon. And after – for a follow-up appointment...there was a picture of River in his office -- he told me she was his sister. He was very proud of her.”

“And the reason you never mentioned this before is...?”

“It wasn’t any of your business,” Inara retorted .

Mal turned a furious gaze on Simon. “And *you* never told me because...?”

“I wasn’t sure if she remembered me,” Simon replied, weakly. “Besides, there was doctor/patient confidentiality to consider.”

“You mean to tell me you’d rather be killed then tell me you and Inara knew each other?” The captain’s voice was furious.

“What if I had told you but Inara didn’t remember me?” Simon retorted. “How would that have helped me? She and I -- we’ve never talked about it before.”

“We really haven’t, Mal,” Inara agreed.

“How do I know you ain’t just saying this to keep him alive?” He looked at the Companion, scowling.

“Have I ever lied to you before?” she replied calmly.

“How the hell would I know?” he snapped back “Seems to me the answer must be yes, considering you ain’t never told me this!”

Mal let his gaze scan the room, noting Jayne’s amused expression, Wash’s angry frown and Kaylee’s tearful face. Book was looking at him and he could tell the older man was willing him to do ‘the right thing’. Zoe was regarding him stoically, but she tilted her head to the side as if to say, “*What are you going to do now?*”

Simon, of course, kept his face carefully blank -- but he couldn't hide the sudden hope that had sprung up into his eyes. Mal shook his head at him, before letting his gaze come to rest on River.

She looked crazy again. Her eyes were wide and swimming in tears, her hair wild and tangled around her face. She stepped closer to him when he smiled tentatively at her. "What do you say, little one. Are you sure?"

"She is lost without him," she murmured. "There is no River without Simon."

"You're asking me to take a big leap of faith here. If he ain't who you say he is, I'm putting all of us at risk. You understand? *Dong ma?* "

River nodded. "You trust her?"

"Trusted you about Early, didn't I? Near as I can tell, you're probably the only person on this boat ain't ever lied to me before."

"What do you call the whopper about Simon not being her brother?" Jayne offered.

Mal ignored him. "Don't make me regret this, little girl."

"She won't," River replied. "He needs looking after, just like she does."

Mal nodded at that, before turning to Zoe. "Let him go."

Zoe smiled slightly at that, "Yes sir."

Mal watched Simon sag with relief. The minute his arms were free of the restraints, he wrapped one around River and one around Kaylee and pulled both crying girls against his chest.

His blue eyes searched out Mal's over the tops of their heads, his gaze bright with emotion and relief, but he didn't say anything. Instead, he nodded at Mal. Mal nodded back, before turning and stalking out of the kitchen. He still wasn't sure he'd done the right thing.



It seemed the catwalk was his favorite place to think on things. Jayne was down at his weight bench with Book, the two men taking turns spotting each other. Simon had approached him earlier, stiffly, and had thanked him for the concern he had shown River earlier.

Mal had shrugged at that. How was he supposed to respond? He had been planning on killing the man not two hours ago, and protecting River had only been part of the reason.

“I don’t want...I’m hoping you won’t want us to leave the ship,” Simon had said. “River likes it here and she trusts you. I know we’ve had our differences --” he’d smirked slightly when he said this, “but I feel better knowing someone else will look after her if anything should happen to me.”

“Doc...” Mal had begun to reply, but Simon had held up his hands.

“No. Don’t say anything. I am angry, you know. I thought I’d proven myself enough by now, what with getting shot and saving lives, but I guess I was wrong. I can live with the fact you don’t like me or trust me all that much, though, as long as River is happy and safe.”

Mal nodded at that. “I wish I could tell you different, but I still ain’t convinced that what she told me this morning wasn’t the truth.”

Simon shrugged at that, “I wouldn’t be either, were I in your position. I understand why you thought what you did. That doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“Don’t expect you to like it none,” Mal agreed. “Just don’t make me regret changing me mind.”

“I won’t. Don’t make *me* regret trusting you with River.”

“I won’t.”

They were silent for a few minutes, before Simon offered, tentatively, “Inara... she didn’t really lie to you.”

“That’s a road you don’t want to travel with me, Doc. She ain’t none of your concern.”

“She is though,” Simon argued, “especially if her telling you what she did has made you not trust her.”

“I ain’t talking about this with you. Go look after your sister.”

The younger man looked like he was going to say more, before apparently thinking the better of it and heading limping towards his quarters. Mal watched him leave, wondering if there ever would come a time when he’d regret today’s decision.

Knowing the way his life worked, he figured there probably would be. Seemed he always lived to regret most of the decisions he had made. He certainly regretted ever renting out his shuttle.



With a shake of his head, he decided it was time to go find Inara. It was only a short walk to her shuttle. He didn't bother to knock when he reached her door; instead he slid it open and entered.

She was sitting on one of her dainty little settees, staring off into space, a book of poetry held absently in her hands. It took her a few moments to realize he was standing in front of her, but when she did she flushed slightly and bit her lip.

There was an uncomfortable silence in which they both just looked at each other before she finally murmured his name. "Mal...."

"Don't Inara, I ain't interested. Just came to see what plans you've made for leaving. Think it's time, mayhap. Don't want you prolonging this."

Inara bit her lip. "I'm sorry I didn't..."

Mal shook his head, "You're only sorry you had to tell me. We've had our differences, Inara, but I always thought you'd be truthful with me. Counted on it, even. Just wanted to let you know, I ain't gonna argue with you no more about your leaving. Arguing implies giving a damn, and right now I really don't."

It wasn't until he'd turned and left that Inara let the tears she'd been holding back start to fall.



Simon frowned at the small cup of pills in his hand. He was running out of options and he wondered what he would do when he didn't have any more. The combinations he worked with were increasingly more volatile. Who knew what reactions River would have to them; what fallacies her mind would spin under the influence of the pills?

She was still wearing the vest she'd ripped the buttons off.

"*Mei-mei*," he whispered, reaching out and gently brushed her hair from her face, "I have some new medicine for you."

Her eyes were wide and haunted as she looked up at him. "Will they make me dream again?"

Simon shook his head, "I hope not. I've put a smoother in there for you. That should help."

"Am I dreaming now?" Her voice was soft and hesitant and Simon wanted to cry out against it. Instead, he smiled at her tenderly and stroked her hair again.

"No, *mei-mei*, you're not."

She nodded solemnly at him and obediently swallowed the meds he handed her. “This is reality, then.”

“For now,” Simon agreed sadly. He helped her settle down in her bed and pulled the blankets up around her thin shoulders. “Go to sleep, *mei-mei*.”

“Will you be here in the morning?” she whispered.

“Yes,” he replied.

“Will you still be my brother?”

His heart twisted at her words, “I’ll always be your brother, *xiao mei-mei*. Always.”

He watched her as she fell asleep and wondered as he finally stood to find his own bed if she would ever be his sister again.

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